the **Whitworth**

William Morris: Common Paradise

A major exhibition about William Morris bringing together more than 100 works, which reveal his ideas about nature, craftmanship and social equality remain relevant to some of today's most urgent challenges.

5 December 2026 – 31 October 2027



Image credit: *Pimpernel*, wallpaper designed by William Morris and Jeffery & Co, for Morris & Co. (1876). Image courtesy of the Whitworth, The University of Manchester. Photograph: Michael Pollard

The Whitworth proudly presents *William Morris: Common Paradise,* a major exhibition showcasing an exceptional group of works and objects from across Morris's career. Looking beyond his iconic patterns and designs, the exhibition reveals Morris's continued relevance as a radical thinker grappling with ideas about nature, making, equality and society.

As the first major exhibition dedicated to Morris at the Whitworth in over two decades *Common Paradise brings* together over 100 objects, including more than 70 from the Whitworth's internationally significant collection alongside important works from the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow. Spanning textiles, wallpapers, large scale tapestries, furniture, stained glass, published material, paintings and drawings. Across these works, visitors can see how Morris's ideas about beauty, labour and materials shaped both the objects he designed and the ways in which they were made.

The Whitworth, The University of Manchester
Oxford Road, Manchester, M15 6ER
0161 275 7450
manchester.ac.uk/whitworth

MANCHESTER 1824
The University of Manchester
The Whitworth

The exhibition unfolds through the interconnected themes: *Designing from Nature, Sustainable Manufacturing and Versions of Paradise.* Together, these explore how Morris and his wider circle brought their artistic, political and environmental convictions into different areas of their creative practice, from the design of domestic interiors to the organisation of workshops and his vision for a more equal society.

Visitors will encounter some of Morris's best-known designs, including *Trellis* (1862), his first wallpaper, and the celebrated *Strawberry Thief* (1883), alongside a rich variety of lesser-known works that reveal the experimentation and skilled craftsmanship behind his designs. Recurring natural motifs, including willow, pomegranate and acanthus, appear across different materials and techniques, allowing visitors to trace how Morris transformed forms from the natural world into intricate patterns for everyday life. The exhibition also considers the historical and global influences behind his work, particularly textiles from South Asia and medieval Europe.

William Morris (1834–96) lived through a period dominated by industrial expansion, when mass production transformed how people worked, lived, and the landscapes around them. Disturbed by the human and environmental costs of the changing industrial world, Morris searched for another way. He turned to traditional craftsmanship, skilled labour, natural materials and the beauty of the natural world, believing that the things people made – and the conditions in which they made them – could contribute to a better society.

Five unique pattern books from the Whitworth's collection document Thomas Wardle's experiments with natural dyes and pigments. Based in Leek, Staffordshire, Wardle (1831–1909) worked closely with Morris from the 1870s. His research into Indian dyes and textiles was part of a wider exchange of cultural knowledge that shaped textile design and production from the 19th-century onwards. The books will be displayed at the Whitworth for the first time in over two decades.

Two of the earliest works acquired by the Whitworth, following their presentation at the Manchester Jubilee Exhibition of 1887, the *Flora* and *Pomona* tapestries showcase the successful collaboration between Morris and his friend, the artist Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98). In addition, two exceptional stained-glass panels designed by Burne-Jones for Morris & Company will be on display for the first time this century at the Whitworth.

the **Whitworth**



image 2



image 3

Common Paradise also explores the contradictions within this vision. Born into privilege and committed to labour-intensive methods of production, Morris created objects of beauty that few people could afford. His pursuit of a more equal society and a closer relationship with nature existed within a Victorian world shaped by industrialisation, empire and inequality. The exhibition grapples with these contradictions when considering the legacy and implications of Morris's work today.

Amy George, Senior Curator of Collections at the Whitworth said: "William Morris is perhaps best known for his distinctive patterns, but his work opens up much wider questions about how we make, use and value things. At the Whitworth, we can explore those questions through our collections, connecting Morris's ideas about nature, materials and skilled making with Manchester's own textile histories and with concerns that continue to shape how we live today."

Morris's ideas have particular resonance with Manchester. Once at the heart of the global cotton industry, the city was shaped by the very industrial systems that Morris challenged. Today, Manchester remains closely connected to fashion and textiles, making it a significant place to reconsider his questions about how things are produced, what and how we consume, and the value we place on skilled labour.

Victoria Hartley Lau, Assistant Curator, Textiles and Wallpapers at the Whitworth, said: "In an age where the industrial mills of Manchester and Lancashire have largely given way to warehouses delivering mass-produced goods on demand, we can look to Morris and his contemporaries to see both the values and limitations of handmade work."

The Whitworth, The University of Manchester
Oxford Road, Manchester, M15 6ER
0161 275 7450
manchester.ac.uk/whitworth

MANCHESTER 1824
The University of Manchester
The Whitworth

At the time, the local impacts of industrialisation on the environment and workers were apparent, while its wider global effects were less visible. Today, we have a greater awareness of the global consequences of consumer culture, but the challenge of finding alternatives from within the system echoes the tensions between Morris's ideals and reality.

Common Paradise brings together the Whitworth's internationally significant collection of textiles and wallpapers with important perspectives on Morris's work, placing his ideas in a contemporary and transcultural context. At a time of climate change and growing concern about consumption, the exhibition asks questions that remain strikingly relevant: what does it mean to make things well, to value materials and labour, and to create things that are designed to last?

ENDS

NOTES TO EDITORS

For press information, images and interview requests contact Rees & Co: Emily Gates | emily.gates@reesandco.com | +44 (0)20 3137 8776 | +44(0)7827 779170 | Melissa McFarlane, Communications team at: whitworthpress@manchester.ac.uk

Exhibition credit

William Morris: Common Paradise is organised by the Whitworth, The University of Manchester in collaboration with William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow

Image credits

Lead image: Pimpernel, wallpaper designed by William Morris, manufactured by Jeffery and Co. for Morris and Company, 1876. Image courtesy of the Whitworth, The University of Manchester. Photo: Michael Pollard.
Image 2: Flora, designed by William Morris and Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, made by William Knight, William Sleath and John Martin for Morris and Company, 1885. Image courtesy of the Whitworth, The University of Manchester. Photo: Michael Pollard.
Image 3: Angel with Instrument, Panel from St James's Church, Marylebone, designed by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones for Morris and Company, 1873-75. Image courtesy of the Whitworth, The University of Manchester.

Listings information

William Morris: Common Paradise
5 December 2026 – 31 October 2027
The Whitworth
Free and open to all

Touring exhibition: *William Morris: Common Paradise* will tour to the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) in Gwacheon, Korea from January to May 2028.

Public programme

the **Whitworth**

An extensive public programme will accompany this exhibition, including a special series of events taking place during Morris Month in March 2027. Further details about this will be shared on the Whitworth website soon.

Spring Preview 2027

The Whitworth's Spring exhibitions preview will be held on Thursday 11 February 2027, further details to follow soon.

Supporters

The exhibition publication is supported by The Friends of the Whitworth. Further details will be available soon.

About the Whitworth

The Whitworth is proudly part of The University of Manchester, operating as a convening space between the University and the people of the city. Founded in 1889 for "the perpetual gratification of the people of Manchester" it continues this mission today in new contexts. The gallery, its park and gardens are home to the collection of over 60,000 works of art, textiles, sculptures and wallpapers and provides a platform for artists from around the world. The Whitworth is driven by a vision to actively seek and manifest connections between art, creativity, and their role in developing a more resilient and caring society through its exhibitions and award-winning civic engagement programme.
www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk @whitworthart #thewhitworth

The Whitworth, The University of Manchester
Oxford Road, Manchester, M15 6ER
0161 275 7450
manchester.ac.uk/whitworth

MANCHESTER 1824
The University of Manchester
The Whitworth